

Whose Story?
An exploration into cultural
diversity

at Wightwick Manor

A report prepared for the National Trust

by

Professor Ian Grosvenor

Dr Kevin Myers

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Introduction

This paper gives a summary of the research conducted for cultural diversity project, *Whose Story?* A key aim of the research was to explore the hidden histories of Wightwick Manor and to develop stories that can support a more holistic and more inclusive interpretation of the property. To that end, two key stories emerge.

First, the Liberal and internationalist politics of Sir Geoffrey Mander support a story of a house and a family very much concerned with and connected to the wider world. Most of this story is already well known, easily accessible in the public domain and consistent with those interpretations of country houses that stress patrician public service and radicalism (Mander, 2004).

Second, the marriages of Lionel and Alan Mander to the Indian Princesses Prativa (Pretty) and Sudhira (Baby) touch on themes of class, gender and cultural exchange in the early 20th century. These are complex and private stories, punctuated by silences, pieced together from visits to the British Library, Birmingham Central Library and the archives of the Mander family at Wightwick Manor. Those visits help to sketch a story pieced together from rather fragmentary information. A crucial source here has been what Lucy Moore describes as Sunity Devi's 'relentlessly positive' autobiography (Moore, 2004, p.120) that has some interesting details but also important silences. What can be said with some certainty is that Lionel's marriage to Prativa was short, appears to have been unhappy and was certainly scandalised by the allegations of adultery that accompanied their acrimonious divorce in 1922. Little is currently known about Alan's marriage to Sudhira, but it was long lasting and together they had three children.

Both these stories could be employed to support rather contrasting interpretations of Wightwick Manor. Geoffrey Mander's internationalist politics did bring him into contact with Haillie Selassie and he was active in protesting against the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. However, this is arguably a limited story in terms of both scope and appeal. The documentary evidence examined suggests relatively few meetings between Geoffrey Mander and Haillie Selassie and the correspondence of the former includes only a small number of letters between them. Moreover, any interpretation that focuses on Geoffrey Mander will be largely confined to elite male action in the world of formal politics. By way of contrast, the marriages of Lionel and Alan to Prativa and Sudhira are rich, private and domestic stories with obvious potential for including some BME groups and women in a meaningful interpretation of the property. They are potentially both accessible and inclusive; they are certainly interesting but would require careful thought in terms of presentation. Both these stories would also certainly benefit from further research work in which some of the possibilities identified here could be pursued further. In order to understand the potential of these stories the rest of this introduction briefly sketches a context for the research findings that follow in the rest of the paper.

British rule in India reached its apogee in the period around the 19th and early 20th century (Hall, 2000). After 1858 India was formally governed from Whitehall controlled in the person of the Secretary of State for India and his Council. If titles are taken as symbols of power then the titles 'Viceroy' and 'Empress of India', assumed respectively by the Governor General and Queen Victoria, indicate the development of a new imperialism central to the political vocabulary and identity of the British state (Hobsbawm, 1987, pp.56-83). A key strategy in the new imperialism was the propping up of 'princely states and the landed classes [in India], rewarding loyalty and thus building

up a stratum of society with a vested interest in the Raj' (Visram, 1986, p8). One obvious but frequently overlooked consequence of this new imperialism in India was the further development of the Indian population of Britain. The structure of this population was complex including the cheap labour of sailors, nannies and ladies' maids, a middle class business and professional population, and nobility engaged in politics and pleasure (Holmes, 1988, p.34; Vizram, 1986). Elite Indian men were also increasingly evident in the British education system.

This complex Indian community was diverse in its politics. Attitudes towards British rule in India ranged from the demand for Indian independence to complete support for British rule and devotion to the monarchy. Some Indian women were politically radical and took part in campaigns for women's rights and suffrage whilst others, like Prativa and Sudhira, lived in a very different social milieu. It was in that milieu that they met, engaged and married the Mander brothers.

Narayan family background

Princesses Prativa (Pretty) and Sudhira (Baby) were the daughters of the Maharaja and Maharani of Cooch Behar, Nripenda Narayan and Sunity Devi. The marriage of their parents, Nripenda and Sunity, was encouraged by a British state that had identified them as individuals sympathetic to empire and loyal to the crown. Both Nripenda and Sunity came into this category. Ascending the Cooch Behar gaddi in 1863 as a ten-month old baby, Nripenda's education was heavily influenced by the British; he attended the Wards' Institution at Benares (now Varanasi), a British school for the sons of Indian nobles; he was later sent to the Government College at Patna and had an English tutor and mentor, Sir John Kneller (Sunity Deves, 1921, p.44). Similarly, Sunity Devi had a relatively anglicised upbringing. She was the

eldest daughter of the religious reformer Keshub Chunder Sen, who championed a Brahmo Samaj; 'a reformist, monotheistic wing of Hinduism' (Moore, 2004, p.55) that supported the education of women, though with the explicit aim of being better wives and mothers (Sunity Deveen, 1921, p.21). Together, Nripenda and Sunity Devi adopted a westernised lifestyle – shopping in Bond Street, racing at Goodwood, balls at Buckingham Palace and other stately homes – and they remained active and loyal supporters to British rule in India. The entire family attended the coronation of Edward VII in 1901, where Sunity Devi was awarded the Imperial Order of the Crown of India (Moore, 2004, p.116). Deveen records; 'Our religion of the New Dispensation teaches loyalty to the Throne. This loyal feeling is a sacred duty to me, and in the whole of India no family is more loyal to His Gracious Majesty than the Cooch Behar Raj family' (Deveen, 1921, p.227).

The Narayan royal family was the most westernised and integrated of the Indian royal families of the period. The family consisted of seven children (four boys and three girls); Raj Rajendra (1882-1913), Sukriti (1884-1958), Jitendra (1886-1922), Victor (1888-1938), Hitendra (1890-1920), Prativa (1891-1923) and Sudhira (1894-1968). All of these children were to experience in rather different ways the difficulties of being both Indian and British (Moore, 2004, pp.110-111). According to Lucy Moore, a sense of tragedy pervades the family history of the twentieth century that testifies to the difficulties of cultural exchange in this period (Moore, 2004, p.294). To what extent this tragedy can be attributed to this experience of cultural exchange is a matter for debate. What can be said with some certainty is that Prativa and Sudhira were members of one of the most anglicised of the Indian royal families, and were entering a world and a culture that saw them either as rather exotic objects.

Princesses Prativa (Pretty) and Sudhira (Baby): childhood and education

Sunity Devee experienced ill-health around the time her two youngest children were born. She was very ill after the arrival of Pretty in Lily Cottage 'in the early morning of 22 November 1891' (Devee, 1921, p. 147) and before Sudhira was born she 'was very very ill with pneumonia and pleurisy' (Devee, 1921, p.147). Devee records that 'the Maharajah spoiled all his children, and this youngest girl he did spoil much; she would never do anything unless she wished' (Devee, 1921, p.147).

The princesses, like their brothers, were sent to boarding school in England. Princesses Prativa (Pretty) and Sudhira (Baby) enrolled at Ravens Croft School in Eastbourne sometime after 1902. Devee does have a chapter (11) on the Education of the Boys but this says nothing about the education of the two youngest girls. The school was opened in 1895 by two sisters (Margaret and Isabel Mullins) and seems to have had an elite and cosmopolitan student population. I am still investigating what archival records remain. Ignoring the education of her daughters, Devee instead records her opposition to, and her sadness at, Raj's departure for school at the age of 12. Raj first attended Mr Carter's Preparatory School at Farnborough, then Eton and Oxford.

In 1906 the girls are described by their mother as

'growing exceedingly pretty and I was proud of the admiration they received'. I have often been playfully accused of over-indulging my girls, but I was so proud of them that I loved to see them wearing pretty things. Pretty was like a gorgeous damask rose just unfolding to loveliness, but perfectly simple and sweet'...Pretty is musical and loving; her weakness is that she can never say 'no'. When she has a grand wardrobe, if anyone comes and admires anything, she feels she

must makes a present of it to her. If she goes to buy a dress, perhaps the dress is unbecoming to her, yet she buys it because the dressmaker wishes her to have it'. (Devee, 1921, pp.182-183)

Sunity Devee's sister Bino described Pretty thus; 'she looks as if a fairy had dropped her from heaven' (Devee, 1921, p.183).

Mander family background

Samuel Theodore Mander (1853-1900) was the eldest son of Samuel Small Mander (1822-1881). He was a strict Congregationalist, politically Liberal and a philanthropist with particular interests in the arts and education. He was a lay preacher, chairman of the School Board, a governor of the Grammar School, of Tettenhall College and Birmingham University (where he endowed a scholarship). In 1900 he and his wife Flora welcomed the Chinese ambassador Lo Feng and his retinue to Wightwick; pictures were taken and some correspondence followed (see extracts). Responsible for the planning and the building of Wightwick Manor, Samuel and Flora had three sons; Geoffrey (1882-1962), Lionel (1884-1946) and Alan (1891-1961) (Mander, 2004, chapter 15).

Geoffrey Mander is arguably the most famous of the Mander brothers. Like his father he read Natural Sciences at Cambridge, joined the family business (1904) and became interested in Liberal politics. He was elected Liberal MP for East Wolverhampton in 1929, was a critic of appeasement in international affairs, and was subject to a personal attack on him by Mussolini after a House of Commons speech condemning the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Mander, 2004, p.255). There is clear evidence to suggest that Geoffrey was in touch with Haile Selassie during his exile in England (see extracts).

Lionel and Alan Mander are not closely associated with Wightwick Manor. They both left the region and the family business in early adulthood. In the context of *Whose Story?* they are interesting primarily for their contrasting marriages to Princesses Prativa (Pretty) and Sudhira (Baby). Lionel's marriage to Prativa was short, appears to have been unhappy and was certainly scandalised by the allegations of adultery that accompanied their acrimonious divorce in 1922. Little is known about Alan's marriage to Sudhira, but it was long lasting and together they had three children.

Lionel Henry Mander, known later in his career as an actor as Miles, spent some of his early adulthood in New Zealand as a sheep farmer (Mander, 2004, p.262). His autobiographical *To My Son – In Confidence* (1934) is one of the main sources of evidence for details on his early life. A forthright advice manual written for his son, the text suggests a young man bored by life in provincial Wightwick. Lionel says that he was left a substantial legacy of some £60,000 (using the Retail Price Index to 2002 this amounts to somewhere in the region of £3.5 million) and a partnership in the business 'worth many thousands a year more'. Though there was a clause stating that he could not access this capital until the age of 28, he suggests that he borrowed against this capital and was left penniless (pp.92-93). What must have been a quite phenomenal rate for spending seems to have been devoted largely to pleasure and leisure. The chapter on sports and pastimes that reveals his passion for motor racing, flying aeroplanes, ballooning (1912) and horse racing where he appears to have had a brief period as an owner; in the 1911 flat season he had 6 horses in training and won 5 races (126-127). Hunting and shooting are also popular.

Lionel's partnership in the business was as fleeting as his inherited fortune; 'after living a year in Wolverhampton I came to the conclusion that I would sooner take potluck anywhere in the world than spend the rest of my life in

such humdrum circumstances' (Mander, 1934, p.93). He says he left for London and joined up when the war started in 1914.

There are fewer details of Alan's early life. Nicholas Mander's recent history of the family suggests a similar story to Lionel; Alan was described in 1901 as 'a boy who likes to be in perpetual motion' (A223) and in a recent family history as " 'a bit of a card', forever badgering them for money after he had dissipated his inheritance" (Mander, 2004, p.265).

Princess Prativa (Pretty), 1891-1923 and Lionel (Miles) Mander

Nripendra, Prativa's father, died in 1911 but, according to her mother 'Pretty's wedding lightened a little of our sadness at this time' (Devee, 1921, p.204). The marriage took place on February 21st 1912 at Woodlands, Calcutta with bride and bridegroom in Indian costumes and in accordance with 'picturesque Brahma-Samaj rites' (various newspaper reports, Mander D/3). Newspaper articles report that the couple lived in London after their marriage.

Devee's *Autobiography of an Indian Princess* provides little further detail on either the early relationship between Prativa and Miles, or their subsequent marriage, separation and divorce in 1922. After a very brief description of their marriage in 1912 (see extracts) there are very few references to them in the text. Prativa is mentioned as sometimes being ill for but whether, as Moore suggests, this a euphemism for alcoholism is open to question (Moore, 2004, p.117).

Neither Miles Mander's autobiographical text, nor his later obituary in the *Times* help in shedding light on his marriage to Prativa. There is a complete and intriguing silence in respect of his marriage to Prativa, though it is

perhaps possible to infer something of their marriage from his comments on relationships and morality. Here he appears to regard relationships as necessarily temporary because the psychology and biology of people dictates that their likes, dislikes, sensibilities and mentalities are subject to change (Mander, 1934, p.34). The institution of (lifelong and permanent) marriage therefore conflicts with human nature and his description of marriage (see extracts) certainly indicates something of his reputation.

In his chapter on women and marriage, Miles describes himself as a rabid anti-feminist who does not believe intelligence and feminism can co-exist. There is a basic statement of the separate spheres argument and then some interesting advice to his son on how to choose a wife (see extracts). In summary, he says that a wife should be healthy, stimulate pride in her husband and have a peaceful temperament.

The extent to which this advice is a reflection on his view of his first marriage is open to speculation. It is possible that he is hinting at some of the events and experiences that were made public in divorce proceedings in 1921/22. These were reported in national newspapers and included the following allegations; Prativa had a violent temper; she was in India between 1916 and 1919 where her conduct was alleged to have been questionable; on her return to England in 1919 she led 'an irregular life' and committed adultery with Reginald de Beer in September and October 1920; some of this conduct was witnessed by Lionel and a police constable called to witness the event through an open window in summer. If all this sounds somewhat improbable then one of the High Court judges, Lord Mersey, also thought so; 'I am asked to believe that there has been adultery in these circumstances which appear to me to be almost incredible' (*The Times*, June 7 1921). In fact, this incredulity about the evidence presented was a major reason for the protracted court case that finally came to an end in May 1922. Again, it is

only possible to speculate on the effect of the divorce on Sudhira and Alan, but there is no evidence of further contact between Lionel and Alan in the Wightwick archives after this time.

Princess Sudhira (Baby), 1894-1968 and Alan Mander

Sudhira is described by her mother as the most 'wilful' of her children. Indeed, Sudhira was supposed to have married Yuvraj of Kapurthala, a marriage arranged at the age of five. Yet she fell in love with Alan Mander, her sister's brother-in-law and was determined to marry him. The feeling appears to have been mutual and despite opposition on all sides the couple were married in 1914. Deveen wrote:

'Baby has married Alan Mander, the younger brother of Lionel. I did not wish her to marry so young nor to part with her so soon, especially as it was only six months after I had lost my Rajey, but now my life has come to that stage that I must not be heard, my love must pray silently for the happiness of my children. They are very precious and their happiness is my happiness. Baby wished to marry this boy; he is fine-looking, and has travelled a good deal, and as he was anxious to have the wedding soon I did not stand in the way, and they were married at Woodlands on the 25th February 1914. During the war he was in the Army and now they are in England. Alan has been a very good son-in-law; I don't think I could have had better, even in fancy' (Deveen, 1921, p.230).

The couple had certainly been determined. Yuvraj of Kapurthala threatened to kill Alan Mander for the slight to his honour. Sunity Devi was also opposed to the marriage and arranged an extended cruise to separate the couple apart in 1913 [?]. Alan Mander simply followed them around the world.

Devee travelled to England for the birth of Baby's first child on the 8th July 1920, in a rented house (7 Lyall Street):

'When Baby was strong enough to be moved she returned to her house at Kingston and I visited her there. Sudhira and Alan gave up their room to me and occupied the drawing room...we were all very happy at being together' (Devee, 1921, p.236; this seems to imply that the two couples were living together at this time).

She stayed in England for a while and speaks fondly of Alan and Sudhira for looking after her and at the pleasure Pamela Ghita gave her. Their subsequent life together seems to have been happy and fulfilled. They had three children together – Geeta, Derek and Garbo – and, despite the effects of his experiences in the war, it appears to have been a successful marriage.

Photograph of Sudhira.

She is photographed wearing a sable muff, over a full-length fur coat. Russell Harris has suggested that it was her taste for expensive furs which led *The Tatler* to report in 1915 that the Maharaja of Cooch Behar's youngest daughter 'was last week at the Law Courts sued by a well-known firm of Court dressmakers'. *The Times* reported that she had ordered dresses amounting to the value of £768 14s 8d (or about £45,000) for the year between May 1913 and May 1914.

The photograph of Sudhira was taken at the studio of Alexander Bassano, 24 December 1910. Bassano (1829-1913) had one of the earliest commercial photographic studios in London. It was opened in 1850 in Regent Street and in 1876 moved to 25 Old Bond Street. The latter was a favoured location for

studies because of its proximity to most of the official venues in London. The studio was large enough to accommodate an eighty foot panoramic background scene mounted on rollers. This was used to provide a variety of outdoor scenes or court settings as backdrops. Clients wanted their images to be 'works' of art, whether this meant having the photographer retouch complexions, alter waistlines, tint, tidy up stray hair or hand colour the image. An advantage of the photograph over the painted portrait was that many copies could be ordered (Harris, Maharajas, n.d.).

Bassano's studio also photographed:

- Maharaj Rana Sir Bhawani Singh Bahadur of Jhalawar (1874-1929) 25 September 1920.
- Nawab Muhammad Iftikhar Ali Khan Bahadur, Hanifi ul-Muzhab, Nawab of Pataudi (1910-1952) 15 September 1929.
- H.H. Farzand-i-Khas-i-Daulat-i-Inglisiah, Shrimant Maharaja Sir Sayajirao 111 Gaekwad, Sena Khas Khel Shamsheer Badahur, Mararaja of Baroda (1863-1939) and his son, 24 July 1934.
- H.H. Maharanja Sir Pratab Singh, Malvendra Bahadur of Nabha (1919-1995) and members of his family, 31 October 1936.

Possibilities for future research

Any future research aimed at developing these stories will inevitably be rather labour intensive because of the fragmentary nature of the source material. However, there is almost certainly more information available:

- There is likely to be further comment and information on the Cooch Behar family in the files of the India Office in the National Archives
- There are references to archives of the school which both Prativa and Sudhira attended and these might be a source of further information. There was a school magazine written and produced by the girls that may contain further information, or even something written by them.
- Details of Lionel's and Alan's military service in the First World War might be obtained at the National Archives.
- Time consuming and sensitive, it may be possible to do some oral history work with surviving family members.
- The existence of archives in India is more than likely and should be considered.

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The Mander Family: background

Charles Nicholas Mander describes Samuel Small as representing a 'blend of pious non-conformity, public-spirited liberalism, strict teetotalism and intellectualism that was to characterise the Wightwick branch of the family for generations to come' (Mander, 2004, p.237)

John Mander (son of Geoffrey Mander, 1932-1978), *In the Middle of the Way* (unpublished autobiography)

... I have heard at second-hand from a friend of my father's governess that 'when Mr Mander (his father) entered the room it seemed that a kind of gloom descended on it'. My own guess ... being based on certain assumptions about the non-conformist Puritan background of the Mander family is that my own father as a young man was indeed a little like his own father; solemn, strict, a Victorian not yet fully aware that he was living in our twentieth century.

To an outsider – my mother, for instance – the Manders must have seemed a rum lot: the weirdest mixture of the puritanical and the profligate ... My fathers ... brothers! They were indeed goats of the deepest dye. My father's youngest brother, Alan, had run through a fortune of some £60,000 before the First World War, and was so dangerous a sponger that even my father after awhile refused to see him. Lionel, the other brother, I remember liking as a boy – he gave me a cartridge belt of which I was very proud – but in his early years he drank and womanised on a scale that suggests that both younger brothers were intent on ridding themselves of their puritanical backgrounds as thoroughly and as rapidly as possible. Still Lionel must have had more sheep in him than was allowed for he achieved fame as a novelist, a playwright and film actor in the thirties – as 'Miles Mander' – and later migrated to Hollywood. In his case one seems to see some of the sheep emerging as he grew older: he gave up drink, and did much work for Britain in America during the war. His son Theo, my first cousin, now lives there and is a solid citizen.

Another prominent goat, of course, was my half-sister Mavis. None of my father's putative harshness had descended on her; but also none of his discretion and self-discipline. Alan and Lionel had both married Princesses – of the house of Cooch Behar – and Mavis was determined to be no less exotic in her lifestyle. She died in her forties, leaving five children: two boys, one of

whom she disowned, and three small girls for my father to educate. It was often not clear who the fathers were ... and she was fond of making up fantastic stories about their parentage ... despite behaviour that father can only have considered outrageous, I know for a fact that she always remained his favourite child ...

[re: 'maternal grandmother]

... her charm was in her inconsistency: she hated jews ... but was most kind to one refugee boy, whom she taught to speak English. She hated Blacks, but could not resist pawing them in their prams on her daily walk up to the grocers and the butchers. Theoretically she had ferociously Tory views, as time bordering on Fascist.

Her class consciousness is perhaps of some relevance. One day on a walk she remarked to me casually, 'Of course we're middle class, you know'. I was baffled. I had understood that there were only two classes, people we knew and people whose duty it was to do things for us. But here, all of a sudden appeared this 'middle class' ... The significance of 'class consciousness' ... was clearly deeply rooted in her psyche. You must know your place; you must know your superiors and inferiors

Geoffrey Mander suggesting contact with Haile Selassie

'Dearest John

Thanks for your letter, I see you like to have them. I had lettuce and tomato sandwiches in Parliament today and my Abyssinian friend had a ham sandwich'.

(D4, Papers of John Mander, September 30)

Lionel on his father and Wolverhampton:

Miles Mander's *To My Son – In Confidence* (1934) is dedicated to the legion of devoted fathers who, through doing the 'decent thing' in divorce or estrangement, are now anxious for their sons'. He describes his father – Samuel Theodore Mander – as an 'excessively good man of puritanical yeoman stock. He was a member of a large and prolific family which is localized in the neighbourhood of Wolverhampton, where they manufacture varnish. That they have been doing this for 150 years only goes to prove that insanity and integrity are very closely allied. The only justification for an

occupation so prosaic, and an existence so provincial, must be the accumulation of wealth' (p.19)

'after living a year in Wolverhampton I came to the conclusion that I would sooner take potluck anywhere in the world than spend the rest of my life in such humdrum circumstances' (Mander, 1934, p.93).

Lionel on patriotism:

Chapter IV On Your King and Country is a patriotic lecture that supports the assertion that England is the greatest nation on earth', that King George V is the greatest king in all the world etc.....Though in page 69 he describes himself as a Fabian and 'internationally conscious'. The chapter that follows on Other Kings and Countries has a stereotyped description of nations and cultures but no mention of India or Cooch Behar.

He joined the Labour Party in 1920.

There is a rather surprisingly moralistic chapter on sexual morality complaining about the cheap vulgarity and coarseness of the modern young person (p.158) and which describes homosexuality as depraved and an affectation of degeneracy (pp.165-66).

His son was born in Broadstairs in May 1926. This was during the General Strike. Mander says he had no money, was sympathetic to the strikers but wanted to get out of London because he thought it would be 'safer'. (p.12)

Princess Prativa (Pretty), 1891-1923 and Lionel (Miles) Mander

On the marriage of Prativa and Lionel:

'Pretty's wedding lightened a little of our sadness at this time. My second girl was engaged to Lionel Mander, a young Englishman who appeared devoted to her. She was just like an English girl, although at home she lived as an Indian Princess. I gave my consent to the marriage, as I had long ago determined to let each of my girls marry the man she loved, and I quite realised that, owing to caste and creed, there would be many difficulties in the way of marriage with any of our princes' (Devee, 1921, p.204)

Lionel Mander on relationships:

'as we humans pass through life, our susceptibilities become subject to various phases which are largely psychological and are occasioned, I believe, by glandular permutation. They are, at any rate, beyond our control. During this process very definite alterations take place. There is a change in our likes and dislikes, in our sensibilities, in our mentalities, and in our intellectual selves' (p.23).

Lionel Mander on the institution of marriage:

Whilst he and his second wife do 'not cohabit to the extent that conventionally married people should', they do 'meet, go out together and are fundamentally fond of each other'. 'But the external influences that modern civilisation brings to bear on men and women who have mated according to legal requirements are so complex, irritating, subversive, and difficult of understanding that it requires either a nature of supreme tolerance, a common feeling of supine indifference, or a perception of acute dumb-headedness before they can be withstood and viewed in their right perspective' (Mander, 1934, p,22).

'....although I think that marriage qua marriage is a faulty condition, I do not think that it is a convention we can ignore in the present state of social development. There is an inherent desire in women to be wives, irrespective of the question of affection. They have an even stronger urge to be mothers...(Mander, 1934, p.212)